LOVE'S EMBODIMENT
February 11, 2001

FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
John M. Buchanan

By its very existence, the church is an affirmation that one can never believe in God in the abstract. You can't believe in God without following God. Faith is not simply a matter of being attracted to certain beliefs or a point of view. It is complete response, a way of life, a self-giving to someone else, a way of being in love.

William H. Willimon
What's Right With the Church

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Luke 6: 17-26 (NRSV)
1 Corinthians 12: 31-13:13 (NRSV)

"And now faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love." (1 Corinthians 13:13)

Dear God, silence in us any voice but your own now, for we have come here this morning to hear your word for us; to be reminded that you are, that we are not alone; that who we are and what we do matters to you. Startle us, O God, with your truth and open us now to your love, which never ends, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

It's the easiest target in the world, the church is. It always has been. Among institutions, none has higher aspirations or a more ambitious mission statement, and none, consequently, misses the mark by a wider margin than the church.

It is easy to criticize the church, dismiss the church as irrelevant. Spirituality is the rage, a privatized quest for God, meaning, happiness, or at least good feelings which has less and less to do with religion, particularly institutional religion. "I'm a spiritual person," Americans are inclined to say. "But I'm not religious."

People who know the church intimately have a lover's quarrel with it.

Annie Dilliard—"What a pity, that so hard on the heels of Christ come the Christians (the church). (*Incarnation, Contemporary Writers on the New Testament,* p.36, Edited by Alfred Corn)

The poet Southey:
"I could believe in Christ if he did not drag behind him his leprous bride, the church." (William Willimon, *What's Right With the Church,* p.3)

William Willimon, Chaplain at Duke and former parish pastor: "Jesus has many admirers who feel he married beneath his station. They love Christ but are unable to love those whom he loved. . . . For most of us the church is an embarrassment." (p. 3, 13)

C. S. Lewis's Devil in *The Screwtape Letters,* describes the church as one of his best allies in the battle for a new convert's soul.

Bill Gates—"Just in terms of the allocation of time resources, religion is not very efficient. There's a lot more I could be doing on Sunday morning."

And on that same topic, Willimon tells about a church visitation team from his Methodist parish calling on a young woman who said that she did not like 'organized religion' and a team member replied, "Well, you'll be happy at Northside Church: we've been trying for thirty years but we ain't got it organized yet." (Ibid p.36)

Most devastating to me, at least, given what is happening in our own church and all mainline denominations, is something Reynolds Price wrote. Price is a distinguished writer and teacher who deals honestly and eloquently with religious questions. He wrote, "The church, in most of its past and present forms, has defaced and even reversed whole broad aspects of Jesus' teaching; but in no case has the church turned more culpably from his aim and practice than its hateful rejection of what it sees as outcasts: the whores and cheats, the traitors and killers, the baffled and stunned, the social outlaw, the maimed and hideous and contagious . . . . If it is possible to discern, in the gospel accounts, a conscious goal of Jesus . . . can we detect a surer aim than his first and last announced intent to sweep the lost with him into God's coming reign?" (*Three Gospels,* P.33)

It is the easiest target in the world, the church is and always has been. But sometimes, mostly in ways that are not conspicuous or dramatic, the church is what God calls it to be—an incarnation, an embodiment of Jesus Christ and his love in the world. When that happens, the church is unspeakably beautiful and magnificent.

Michael Lindvall, Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Ann Arbor, good friend, popular author and story teller, writes out of his own experience as the minister of a small town church in Minnesota. In a wonderful piece called "Our Organist," he tells about being a guest supply preacher for a little church in Carthage Lake, a mythical town on the way down and out. The Carthage Lake church hasn't had a minister of its own since 1939. But a handful of people hold on and gather one Sunday a month, at noon, for Sunday School and worship with whatever preacher they can convince to come to Carthage Lake. The Clerk of the congregation, Lloyd Larson, tells him that there are only eleven members, but they'll all be there. "And he promised an organist, the same organist Carthage Lake has been promising guest preachers for 60 years, Lloyd's sister-in-law, Agnes Rigstad.

> **The Sunday of his guest appearance arrived and Michael describes the small white frame building, the large sentimental stained glass windows of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, lamb in one arm, staff in the other and Jesus praying alone in the Garden of Gethsemane, two cars and a pick-up truck out front.**
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> **There were twelve worshippers, actually, including a young man, scattered throughout the sanctuary, sitting in their customary pews. Lloyd explained that there was no bulletin, that the preacher should just announce the hymns. Michael nodded to the organist, with her wig slightly askew, who responded with a broad smile.**

Worship began. Michael announced the opening hymn, #204, Spirit of God, Descend Upon My Heart—Agnes smiled at him and played "What a Friend We Have in Jesus". The eleven elderly members sang by memory. Only the young man used a hymnal.

Following the sermon, Michael announced the next hymn, "Love Divine, All Love Excelling." He looked directly at Agnes who smiled back and played, "I Love to Tell the Story."

After the prayers and offering, Michael walked over to the organ bench, bent down and whispered, "Agnes, what are we going to sing?" She smiled and began to play "Just as I Am, Without One Plea."

After worship, Agnes shook his hand but didn't say a word. Lloyd sheepishly explained: "Forgot to tell you about Agnes . . .You don't need to tell us what the hymn is, only when. Agnes only knows those three hymns, so we always sing em."

"Good grief, Lloyd, you mean to tell me you've been singing the same three hymns for 60 years?" Lloyd was concentrating on the frayed sanctuary carpet. 'We like those hymns well enough, and we known em by heart . . . .And she's our organist. . . ."

Later, Michael met the young man, Neil Larson, Lloyd's grandson, who explained, "Agnes is my late grandmother's little sister, Lloyd's wife's baby sister. Agnes has never been quite right. She never says more than a few words . . . But she learned to play those hymns in one week 60 years ago when the regular organist got sick. It was a moment of musical emergency. Anyway, she hasn't been able to learn one since. Playing the organ this one Sunday a month means the world to her. Sometimes I think it's mostly for her that they keep the church open. Aunt Agnes lives for the first Sunday of the month."

"I will show you a still more excellent way," St. Paul wrote to the little Christian church in Corinth. It was a church not acting like a church is supposed to act, which is to say, acting like the church often acts; arguing, disputing, name calling, making a spectacle of itself, discrediting the Gospel.

I'll show you a better way, Paul said. "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or clanging cymbal; if I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing."

They are among the most familiar and beloved words in the language, read at countless weddings, even though the situation which prompted them was anything but romantic.

As he has earlier in his letter to the Corinthian church, Paul draws on a word and a concept from Greek literature, Agape—an attitude of self-giving, a way of relating that regards the needs of the other, or the community, before personal needs. The King James Version translated agape "charity"—faith, hope, charity—but charity came to mean public philanthropy so more recent translations render agape as love. The problem is that there are several other good Greek words that are translated love—philia, eros, for instance. Agape is a big concept. It doesn't have much to do with feelings at all. It has a lot to do with how people relate to one another in community, which means it is primarily a social and political word.

There is a better way to relate than the normal human mode of relating with others based on self-preservation first, then self-satisfaction, self-fulfillment, self-actualization. Self—Self—Self. That's how human societies, human institutions work—by addressing my needs as an individual. Our economic system is built on it—an economic machine designed to produce and allow me to purchase whatever I want, or whatever I have become convinced that I need to be fulfilled and happy.

In this way of thinking, even good works, acts of compassion and generosity are promoted not because other people need help, but because helping others will make you feel better.

Even the U. S. Army has succumbed. The latest Army recruiting ad campaign focuses not at all on service or patriotism, protecting the community or defeating enemies—but bringing out the potential of the individual.

There is an alternative way of thinking Paul proposes. It is radically counter culture in the first century and the 21st century. This way was actually lived out once, in the world, in human history, in a human being. Jesus of Nazareth who Paul asserts was God's only son, the embodiment of the reality and mystery of God. He was a man for others. He lived out his life on behalf of others. He gave his life away. That's who God is, Paul is saying, not some Olympian figure, muscular, sitting on a mighty throne, casting thunderbolts or frowning in judgment at human behavior. No—God is here—this one—this one who gives life away for others. This one who says "blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the meek"—this one who says, "if you save your life you lose it, if you give your life away in my name, you will find it"—this one who follows the way of Agape to the end, dying on a cross, Christ crucified.

And what does human behavior look like which has been challenged and converted and reshaped by this one and his love? What does the community of believers look like in the world?

Agape—love—the new life lived in the world, by individuals and collectively by the community of believers which Paul, significantly calls the "body of Christ" is

> **Patient and kind**
> **Not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude**
> **This radical, counter culture way does not insist on its own way, does not rejoice in wrong doing, rejoices rather, in the truth.**

This radical new way of being has the power and eternity of God in it, and so in life, in individual lives and in the collective life lived by the community of believers, it can bear all things, it can believe all things, it can hope all things, it can endure all things, anything, everything. Because love—this mysterious essence of God—this absolute foundation of the universe and of human life—this love never ends. And when somehow, by God's good grace, the community does it, embodies the reality of God's love, a miracle happens: it becomes the Body of Christ, the Church.

> **After greeting the eleven worshipers including Lloyd Larson and his sister-in-law Agnes, the organist, the lone young man lingered on.**
> **"Aunt Agnes lives for the first Sunday of the month," he said. "Sometimes I think it's mostly for her that they keep the church open."**
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> **"They asked me to play, of course," the young man went on. "They had to ask. But grandpa knew I'd say no. I remember how he sighed with relief when I said no. Then he slapped me on the back."**
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> **"You're an organist?" the preacher asked. "Eastman (School of Music) class of 84. I've had some big church jobs, the last one down in Texas, big church . . . brand new organ, 102 ranks. Four services a Sunday. Then I got sick. I've been HIV positive for six years. The personnel committee of the church figured it out, the weight loss, all the sick days, not married. They told me it would be best if I moved on, but not till after Christmas, of course. My parents live in St. Paul, but my father and I haven't spoken since I was 19 . . . I'm not sick enough to be in the hospital, just too tired most of the time. I really had nowhere to go. My grandfather said I could move in with him and Agnes. To tell the truth, I feel right at home in a town of 80-year olds."**
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> **He paused and went on, "They keep Agnes and they took me in. And since I moved up here, most every night Lloyd or old man Engstrom from down the road opens up the church for me. If it's cold, they lay a fire in the wood stove. And then I play the organ. It's a sweet little instrument, believe it or not. Lloyd's kept it up.**
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> **"These last weeks it's been almost warn in the evenings, so they leave the doors and windows of the church open and everybody sits out on their front porch and they**

listen to me play—Bach, Buxtehude, Widor, all the stuff I love. And they clap from their porches, even Agnes claps."

Love bears all things
believes all things
hopes all things
Endures all things . . . .
Faith, hope and love abide, these three, and the greatest of these is love.

Amen

(Excerpts from "Our Organist" are adapted from a chapter in a forthcoming book by Michael Lindvall, tentatively entitled, *Leaving North Haven* to be published this Fall, with permission of the author.)